



UNIVERSITY
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Frontier Conflict in Van Diemen's Land

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Declaration of Originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution, except by way of background information and duly acknowledged in the thesis, and to the best of my knowledge and belief no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made in the text of the thesis.

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24 April 2013

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Abstract

Eastern Van Diemen's Land was the site of the most intense frontier conflict in Australia. What is known today as the Black War (1824-1831) produced at least 450 colonial casualties and all but wiped out the Aborigines. This thesis examines the attitudes and experiences of the men, women and children – black and white – who were involved. It asks: How did each side perceive the other? What motivated them to violence? What tactics did they employ? How did each side cope with being hunted? And what was the emotional cost? These questions are long overdue. Historians have almost invariably examined the War from the 'top down', poring over ethical and legal questions. These are important concerns for posterity, but they were not those of Aborigines or frontier colonists. Their beliefs, desires, behaviours and emotions constituted the human side of the Black War, and they have been all but ignored.

The alternating white/black chapters of this thesis juxtapose the perspectives of colonists and Aborigines. Close attention has been paid to the minutiae of frontier life, which were a chief determinant of behaviour and experience. Drawing on a range of methods, the cultures, voices and actions of participants have been sifted from Tasmania's vast archive. To verify and contextualise this anecdotal evidence, a catalogue of all recorded violent incidents and their details has been appended.

The Black War was a guerrilla war consisting of hundreds of ambushes on Aborigines' camps by night, and on colonists' huts by day. Exceptions to this day/night pattern were rare, which meant the War was fought and experienced according to a solar rhythm. A key source of white violence was sex deprivation. European women being extremely scarce, so frontiersmen sought black females any way they could. Later, revenge and self-defence also motivated them to kill. Aborigines attacked whites to resist invasion, avenge mounting insults, and to plunder food and blankets. Both lived in suffocating fear, terrified of their enigmatic foes. Likewise, both saw themselves victims, and both felt justified in victimising the other. It was not a battle between good and evil, but a struggle between desperate human beings.

This thesis challenges a range of long-standing assumptions about the War, while also providing new evidence and perspectives. Its attitudinal and experiential analysis illuminates the War in a new light, while its quantitative analysis indicates a larger-scale conflict than previously imagined, with distinct and telling patterns of violence. Moreover, a systematic examination of frontier conflict at the ground level and from both is all but untried in Australian history.

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